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ABSTRACT

A procedure was developed to help counseling students define their beliefs about people and their behavior and thus help them to identify their personal counseling theory. Class discussion concerning congruency between personal and professional beliefs is the result of using this procedure. Practicum students are expected to be familiar with a variety of theories. It has been observed that when students are asked to select their personal theory many either blindly select or claim a theory practiced by a strong faculty member. Choosing a theory involves a synthesis of academic information along with a person's own view of people and the factors that affect their behavior. In this procedure students first identify their theory as they believe it to be and then respond to 50 statements by either agreeing or disagreeing. In using this procedure with over 200 persons it was found that more persons than not were congruent with the theory originally indicated. When this teaching procedure was used in classes, it stimulated much discussion among the students. This discussion was used to either reinforce the theory that the student professed or to help determine if the student was actually practicing another theory. Students who were both personally and professionally congruent expressed more confidence than neophyte counselors. Non-congruent students were helped to look at the differences between their beliefs and their practice. A copy of the theory study guide instrument is attached. (ABL)

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Selecting a Theory of Counseling: Personal and Professional Congruency for Counseling Students

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Abstract

This article describes a teaching procedure that was developed to facilitate the process of students finding a congruent theoretical orientation to counseling. A paper and pencil inventory is used to help students identify their own beliefs about people and their behaviors.

Selecting a Theory of Counseling: Personal and Professional Congruency for Counseling Students

The professor stands at the front of the counseling practicum class. The students are excited and nervous because finally they are going to actually practice some of their counseling skills. The professor begins, "I would like each of you to prepare a paper on your personal counseling theory. Please include information regarding how you view people and their behavior, how people fit into their environment and what causes maladaptive behavior. This will help indicate whether there is congruency between the theory you select and your personal approach to life."

For most students the assignment is a challenge. They have studied the major theories, but becoming knowledgeable about a theory is quite different than claiming it personally. They leave the class, rush to the library, and start reviewing various theory books. It is during this process that students may discover difficulties in the task of personalizing a particular theory base.

The authors have observed that this process can be assisted with instructional facilitation. It was with this in mind that the procedure described in this paper

was developed. It is designed to help students define their beliefs about people and their behavior and thus help them to identify their personal counseling theory. Class discussion concerning congruency between personal and professional beliefs is the result of using this procedure.

Personal Beliefs

Practicum students are expected to be familiar with a variety of theories. More importantly, master's students at The University of South Dakota are expected to identify with a theory that is congruent with their beliefs about people and their environments.

When an assignment like the one presented is made, the authors have observed that many students either blindly select a theory or claim to be whatever theory may be practiced by a strong faculty member. For example, the authors noticed that a sizable number of students at one university claimed to have an Adlerian orientation. This was the theory of a particularly charismatic professor. At another university, Gestalt was the theory claimed by many students. There was a focus on Gestalt theory in this particular department. Theory bases selected in this way do not have the element of personal congruency.

Sometimes students simply use the term "eclectic." The result of this can be a disorganized, unsystematic approach to the counseling process. Hess (1980) discusses "accidental" eclecticism. He describes this as the point at which there is some sort of reconciliation of the strengths and weaknesses of differing theories. The result might be, however, that counselors find they are completely lost in their approach to working with a client. "They are not sure of where they are or how far off the nearest (forest) clearing may be, but they keep hacking away as best they can (Kennedy, 1977, p. 18).

Choosing a theory involves a synthesis of academic information along with a person's own view of people and the factors that affect their behavior (Patterson, 1986). According to Belkin, it is not clear whether counselors focus first on their own view of people and then select a theory that is compatible with their beliefs, or if they first select a theory and then develop a counseling approach that is compatible with that theory (Belkin, 1988).

Master's degree students at The University of South Dakota are required to take a theories course prior to the practicum. They are also encouraged to explore their personal belief systems and thus ground

their counseling skills in a theory that is congruent with these beliefs. The authors realize that it can be difficult for students to identify their own beliefs about people and their behaviors. While counseling programs and curricula are varied, it is suspected that other counselor educators wrestle with this particular educational issue.

The Procedure

The vehicle used in the process is a paper and pencil inventory. This inventory can be found in the Appendix. The format was developed by William R. Miller (Miller & Jackson, 1985). It involves presenting questions that require a forced choice. The authors selected fifty statements from the original writings of theorists in each of four major areas: psychoanalytic, client-centered, behavioral, and rational/cognitive. The statements come from the perspectives of the theorists regarding people and the source of their maladaptive behaviors.

A counselor educator with expertise in the area of theories was asked to read and evaluate the selection of statements and the decisions made by the authors regarding the theory or theories represented by each statement. Modification resulted from this consultation. Examples of these statements include:

1. Psychoanalytic: A goal of therapy is to maintain a balance between instincts and societal norms.
2. Rational/cognitive: Thinking precedes feeling.
3. Client-centered: The therapist needs to totally accept the client.
4. Behavioral: People are conditioned to be the way they are.

Three counselor educators were asked to respond to the pencil and paper inventory and share their reactions. They were in consensus that their results represented the theory base ascribed to by each educator. In addition each of the counselor educators reacted favorably to using the statements as a teaching tool. One educator commented: "I had fun taking this. ...it could be a good vehicle for stimulating thought, behavior, or feelings about my role as a counselor."

Students first identify their theory as they believe it to be, and then respond to each statement by either agreeing (A) or disagreeing (D). A scoring sheet is used to analyze the responses. Students transfer their responses to this sheet and then count the number of "agrees" in each column. Since there are fifty statements, multiplying each total by two gives a percentage for each of the four general theoretical

orientations covered in this questionnaire. The students then compare their results with the theory selected.

This procedure has subsequently been administered to over 200 persons. These persons include both masters' and doctoral level graduate students in counseling, counselors working in the field, and participants at workshops. Workshops using this procedure have been held at both the state and national level. It was found that more persons than not were congruent with the theory they initially indicated. At a recent national conference some of the comments received were:

> I teach and have been looking for something just like this.
>
> I was surprised by my higher score in client-centered as I do not think of myself as Rogerian.
>
> This was interesting. I wish I had taken it during my masters' program.

How to Use the Results

When this teaching procedure was used in classes, it stimulated much discussion among the students. This discussion was used to either reinforce the theory that the student professed or to help determine if the

student was actually practicing another theory. Students who were both personally and professionally congruent expressed more confidence as neophyte counselors. Non-congruent students were helped to look at the differences between their beliefs and their practice. The uses of this teaching procedure are limited only by the counselor educator's creativity.

Discussion

The authors would like to continue exploring the efficacy of this teaching procedure. Few who have responded to this questionnaire indicated psychoanalytic as the theoretical orientation of choice. This category might not be as relevant for counseling students as it might be for physicians training to become therapists. The questionnaire may need to be expanded to include additional theoretical orientations. More feedback is needed from both educators who might use this questionnaire as a teaching tool and students who might view this as a study tool.

Familiarity with the major approaches to counseling and psychotherapy is necessary in order for students to ground their counseling techniques in a solid foundation of theory. Students also need to understand their own views of the factors that

influence human behavior. A foundation of theory along with personally held beliefs about human behavior can provide focus and direction for therapy (Young, 1992). From this foundation, more diverse techniques and strategies can be selected and synthesized into a systematic and pragmatic therapeutic position.

What counselors believe about people and the source of their problems can affect how they will approach therapy (Miller & Jackson, 1985). "The point is awareness, to know what your working assumptions are, to have an organized way of thinking about people and their problems, to have recognized how your own assumptions affect your work as a counselor" (Miller & Jackson, 1985 p.69).

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Appendix

Theory Study Guide

Indicate A for agree or D for disagree with each of the following statements.

_____1. Interpretation by the therapist is crucial to therapy.

_____2. A goal of therapy is to maintain a balance between instincts and societal norms.

_____3. Tension comes from personal wants and needs conflicting with environmental demands.

_____4. Feelings precede thinking.

_____5. The ultimate test of worth is "does it work?"

_____6. What we feel is dependent on what we think.

_____7. Therapy should be a reeducation process to help clients change their irrational ideas.

_____8. Assigning homework is an important aspect of therapy.

_____9. People's perceptions of events is what causes problems.

_____10. Growth occurs when people understand themselves better.

_____11. The function of the therapist is to teach and persuade.

_____12. The purpose of therapy is to bring unconscious feelings into the conscious.

_____13. People come into the world feeling inferior.

_____14. Counselors should be able to disclose their own authentic feelings.

_____15. What a person does is the focus of therapy.

_____16. People are conditioned to be the way they are.

_____17. Thinking precedes feeling.

_____18. The relationship between therapist and client is not important.

_____19. People must change their self-concept to have a change in their behavior or feelings.

_____20. A faulty life style is what causes our problems.

_____21. Problems arise from people's failure to adjust to their environment.

_____22. All behavior is purposeful.

_____23. The therapist needs to totally accept the client.

_____24. Each person is the center of a continually changing world of experience.

_____25. Environmental reinforcement shapes the potential dictated by heredity.

_____26. The goal of therapy is to teach proper thinking.

_____27. Clients must see the connection between thinking, feeling, and their behavior.

_____28. Change internal dialogue, change behavior.

_____29. Clients maintain their disturbances by their thinking.

_____30. People cannot be isolated from society.

_____31. The major emphasis in therapy must be on what is happening right now.

_____32. People are always doomed to be in conflict.

_____33. The goal of therapy is to be that self which one truly is.

_____34. One can look at a specific piece of human behavior and understand it without considering the total person.

_____35. Goal setting by the client is an important part of therapy.

_____36. Attitudes are learned.

_____37. The therapist's role is to help a client gain insight and then change behavior.

_____38. All behavior is learned.

_____39. People are always striving for balance.

_____40. Reflecting feelings is more important than interpreting them.

_____41. An individual can be viewed as a set of observable behaviors.

_____42. People have the ability to think in a rational manner when taught.

_____43. There are no shoulds, haves, and musts.

_____44. Exaggerated goals of superiority can cause problems.

_____45. Defense mechanisms are unconscious and are used to keep threatening impulses away from us.

_____46. Lack of awareness is a basic cause of maladaptivity.

_____47. Learning is by imitation.

_____48. Early experiences provide bases for forming negative concepts about self, future, and the external world.

_____49. People need to feel a sense of completion or closure.

_____50. A person is free to make choices.

Questionnaire Scoring

For each statement, circle all of the A's if you agree with statement. Count the A's in each column, record the total number of A's in each column, and multiply the total in each column by two. These results will indicate the approximate percentage of your agreement with each of these viewpoints in counseling. The theory area for which you had the highest percentage may indicate your theory of preference based on this questionnaire.

P Psychoanalytic

C Client-Centered/Existential

B Behavioral

R Rational/Cognitive

	P	C	B	R
1.	A	D	D	D
2.	A	D	D	D
3.	D	A	D	D
4.	D	A	D	D
5.	D	D	A	D
6.	D	D	D	A
7.	D	D	D	A
8.	D	D	A	A

	P	C	B	R
9.	D	A	D	A
10.	A	A	D	D
11.	A	D	A	A
12.	A	D	D	D
13.	A	D	D	D
14.	D	A	D	D
15.	D	D	A	D
16.	D	D	A	D

	P	C	B	R
17.	D	D	D	A
18.	D	D	A	A
19.	D	A	D	A
20.	A	A	D	D
21.	D	A	A	D
22.	A	D	D	D
23.	D	A	D	D
24.	D	A	D	D
25.	D	D	A	A
26.	D	D	D	A
27.	D	D	D	A
28.	D	D	A	A
29.	D	A	D	A
30.	A	A	D	D
31.	D	A	A	A
32.	A	D	D	D
33.	D	A	D	D
34.	D	D	A	D
35.	D	D	A	D
36.	D	D	D	A
37.	A	A	D	D
38.	D	D	A	A
39.	A	D	D	D

	P	C	B	R
40.	D	A	D	D
41.	D	D	A	D
42.	D	D	D	A
43.	D	D	D	A
44.	A	D	D	A
45.	A	A	D	D
46.	D	A	D	D
47.	D	D	A	D
48.	A	D	D	A
49.	A	A	D	D
50.	D	A	A	A
	—	—	—	—
	Totals			